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Torment of Bulgaria's Turks Described

The barbaric treatment of Bulgaria's large Turkish minority by the communist government in Sofia is designed with one goal in mind: to root out every vestige of Turkish culture, including language, characteristic names and the Moslem religion.

A classified State Department cable last month recounted the emotional testimony of ethnic Turkish eyewitnesses describing the horrors of life in Bulgaria to a committee of the Council of Europe meeting in Istanbul. The cable notes that some of the witnesses were "at times near hysteria" as they told of the primitive brutality practiced on their relatives and friends in the Turkish communities of Bulgaria.

Our associate Lucette Lagnado has seen the cable with the harrowing descriptions by the witnesses. Here are excerpts:

■ A woman named Gungordu, who was born in Bulgaria and left in 1978, returned in 1984 to visit her parents and other relatives. Her stay, in a hotel tightly controlled by Bulgarian police, was limited to seven days. It was more than enough.

Gungordu said her native province of Kurdzhali, which is 75 percent Turkish, seemed to be in mourning. "Names had been violently changed," she said. "They were beating people. They were wounding people. They were holding people by the neck on the ground, forcing them to sign [documents implementing the name changes]."

Old people were beaten, including an 85-year-old, she testified, and when wounded ethnic Turks were taken to hospitals, "doctors and

nurses forced people to sign." She quoted the authorities as telling the victims, "You are Turks no longer . . . You cannot speak Turkish anymore."

Almost breaking down at one point, Gungordu cried out: "We cannot get letters. We cannot telephone. Our old people die calling out our names! They [government officials] even removed tombstones from the graves to change names."

■ A woman named Urtun recalled her 1983 visit to her family in Bulgaria. "My 63-year-old father [was] not served in stores because he does not speak Bulgarian. People [were] tied with ropes and pulled by trucks for refusing to change their names. People [were] being beaten with guns and sticks for resisting the name-change campaign." She said she could "stand it only for one week."

■ A man named Bilaloglu, also from a village in Kurdzhali, said the anti-Turkish campaign began in 1984. "There was genocide," he said. "There was torture." He recounted one chilling incident: "Soldiers and dogs once surrounded my village. Then the soldiers, in teams of two or three, went to each house, forcing us to sign a document changing our names."

Bilaloglu, who later escaped into Greece, said that every one of the Turks' religious customs were outlawed and that special signs were posted at bus stops forbidding the use of the Turkish language.

Bilaloglu said his children were taken away by the Bulgarian government. "I have been told they will be returned in 10 years," he said, "but I do not know the situation now. I do not know what is happening."

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